

QI AND KARATE – IS SOMETHING MISSING FROM OUR TRAINING?

Why Have Most Japanese & Okinawan Karate Systems Dropped the Study, Use and Acknowledgement of Qi/Ki?

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Introduction

Since Asian cultures first came to the knowledge of Western/European derived cultures, they have been considered strange and mysterious. Silk fabrics unimagined in the West. Fine china and porcelain pottery which the West couldn't duplicate. Exotic spices, exotic foods, the list goes on. From the time of Marco Polo or even earlier, Asians and their culture seemed to have been a curious fascination for Westerners which quite frankly continues to this day.

One aspect that eventually began filtering into mainstream Western knowledge was the field of martial arts. Asian fighting techniques were reputed to be almost magical in their ability to disable opponents. At the core of this was the mysterious concept of Qi, also spelled Chi or Chee, and Ki in Japanese. This was described as a form of living energy that permeated the universe and was vital to life. Asian healing was said to also rely on this curious energy, the Qi, and of course, Western science balked.

Qi couldn't be measured, at least not then, in the 1800s and early 1900s. Dissection of human cadavers revealed no structures that corresponded to the meridians mapped in Chinese diagrams of the human body. Therefore, the Western conclusion was, they didn't really exist, and Qi was nothing more than quaint folk tales being passed on by ignorant people unaware of true science.

Well, to make a very long, complicated story very short, science eventually got better. As I'll present later in this paper, meridians have been measured. The human qi field has been photographed. Qi is a living energy, and simply isn't to be found flowing in dead human bodies, so no dissection will ever reveal them, or their closely related energy structures, the Chakras. The field of Modern Physics – Quantum Mechanics, Relativity and related subjects – has now produced accurate models for Qi and how it interacts with living organisms, and how we, as living beings, interact with the background energy field of the universe, called the Qi Field in Asian philosophy, and the Quantum Field of modern physics.

The scientific study of Qi and related energies now goes by the name of Subtle Energies. More studies have produced more knowledge, yet, its rate of filtering into modern medicine and biology, which arguably are the fields that could most benefit from upgrading their models, is frustratingly slow.

The field of martial arts, however, which in theory has included the existence and knowledge of Qi as long as the martial arts have existed, does not in fact universally acknowledge Qi.

This is a relatively new situation. It is only in the last 100-150 years that some systems of martial arts have dropped the study and use of these subtle energies from their theories and teachings. Most prominent of them, are the forms of karate based in Japan and Okinawa – karate’s original home.

As a 30+ year practitioner of Japanese and Okinawan karate, I have found this situation curious. When first starting out, I often asked instructors about it and never received any satisfactory answers. At most, some vague response along the lines of “if you want to know more about Qi, go study with someone who knows Qigong” was the best I ever got. I had a background in science and engineering, then made a career change to study Naturopathic medicine and eventually, Oriental medicine, where knowledge of Qi was a core axiom. As my studies progressed, I began to actually see meridians in the body, to see Qi fields and Auras of other people. Once those abilities began to manifest, there was no going back.

No amount of disparaging talk from my karate instructors could dissuade me from believing what I could see with my own eyes, and sense with my own hands or moving within my own body. While karate, in general, looks down on any notion that Qi could be real, in the world of Chinese martial arts, especially those categories known as the “soft” arts, or “internal” arts, the same situation exists in reverse. Qigong masters smile down quaintly at the “hard” arts that don’t acknowledge or study Qi, the way parents would smile down at an ignorant child, struggling to master subjects

such as size and shapes, but doesn’t yet have the cognitive skills to grasp abstract subjects.

In addition to more than 30 years in karate, I also have almost 25 years’ experience in Qigong. In a way, I walk between worlds in the martial arts. I have great respect for the traditions of both karate and qigong. It is my hope that this paper, too long for a simple Blog post, yet too short for a book, will help bridge the gap between my friends in karate, and my friends in Qigong. What I have to say to karate practitioners everywhere, my fellow karate-ka, is that karate and Qi isn’t an either-or situation. Including the study and cultivation of Qi with what we study and practice in karate, only makes our karate stronger. It makes each of us a better practitioner and better teachers. I sincerely hope the information I present here will help some karate-ka embrace the study of Qi.

General Background

Within most Asian cultures, knowledge of and familiarity with Qi are commonplace. People are raised with this all their life: Feng Shui, Food, Yin/Yang/Qi. This fact was really brought to my attention when I was attending acupuncture school, and really struggling with many of the concepts. My Asian friends, though, whether from China, Japan, Korea, or any other country, all seemed to “get it”, easily. Here, the “it” I am referring to was the basic theories behind Oriental medicine. Concepts such as Yin and Yang, Qi or energy flow in a space, and all the myriad ways these can manifest in the field of healing. Finally, one day I

asked a classmate how they seemed to know these things without ever studying or having to read the textbooks. “Because we’re raised with it”, was her reply.

As a non-Asian born and raised in the US, though, I didn’t have that advantage. I kept struggling

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along, and eventually, through practice and patience, I finally started to “get it” myself.

Ironically, Western culture used to acknowledge the existence of our bodies’ subtle energies. Up until the time of the Renaissance, the Vital Force, as it was called, was very much a part of ancient European cultures. When the scientific revolutions of the Renaissance and the crude instruments available at that time failed to find overt, measurable evidence for the Vital Force, it came to be written off as a quaint “old wives’ tale”, and disappeared from respectable scientific discourse. Unfortunately, that attitude has prevailed up to this very day, and continues to limit the progress of biology and medicine, as well as martial arts.

When we consider the role of Qi/Ki in the martial arts in general, and why it is no longer included in almost all systems of Japanese and Okinawan karate, the \$64,000 dollar question really becomes “Does Qi exist?”

If Qi does not exist, if there really is no such phenomenon in nature, then those of us who can sense qi, see qi, and manipulate qi are all hopelessly deluded. Studying qigong, tai chi or any other internal, energy based art is a complete waste of time. Also, it would mean all the healing systems which make use of techniques to manipulate the qi in the body are all producing healing by some other means, no matter how many scientific trials validate the techniques of acupuncture, for example.

On the other hand, if qi does exist, then the styles of martial arts which don’t include it in their course of study are missing a great deal of the foundation needed to produce the most effective martial artists and martial systems possible. Likewise, Western science based systems of healing are also missing the boat, and are therefore handicapping themselves by eliminating a great deal of the full anatomy and physiology of the human organism from the equation.

This short article is not intended to make a full evaluation of the Western medical system and qi. Here, I am merely presenting some basic information that is usually excluded from the

conversation in Japanese and Okinawan karate, and hope that practitioners and teachers of these arts, whom at present aren’t studying Qi/Ki, will reconsider and explore this field with an open and honest mind.

Some authors, when reviewing indigenous cultures around the world, have actually recorded 95 different names for the living energy we know best as Qi. Clearly, the knowledge of this phenomenon transcends time and culture.

Background of Qi in Karate and the Martial Arts

An additional irony of sorts for this subject of Japanese and Okinawan karate systems essentially ignoring the existence of Qi/Ki, is that there are MANY terms in these arts based explicitly on the use of Qi/Ki. Some, namely Aikido, base most of their martial concepts on mastering the use of Ki. Aiki, a term in many martial arts, has a variety of meanings but “United Spirit” is one of the most prominent. The name “Kiai”, or the Spirit Shout of martial arts, is done as a way of focusing the Ki. Kime, a term denoting “Focus” in its most superficial translation, involves uniting the mind, body, spirit and energy all at the same time. There are other examples, of course, and if I missed your favorite, please forgive me.

Some Okinawan arts still contain and teach the use of Vital Points, the Kyusho points, which correspond to acupoints in the meridian system. Many of the applications of kata bunkai can only be adequately explained by the inclusion of kyusho points and energy theory. Many prominent instructors, proficient in the use of Kyusho technique, still don’t acknowledge Qi, however. They write all kyusho phenomena off to the interaction with nerves or blood vessels, and that is that. Some will explicitly tell you that “there is no such thing as Qi”.

The full use and explanation kyusho techniques seems to be traced to the Okinawan master Seiyu Oyata. He appears to have been the first Okinawan master to share this knowledge with Westerners. Several prominent martial artists who trained under him are now strong proponents for including the system of kyusho point striking in

traditional karate. This next wave of kyusho proponents includes names such as Rick Clark, George Dillman and Vince Morris.

As the study of using Qi in martial applications is part of what this paper is recommending to karate-ka, study of the kyusho points, and how to use them – i.e. strike them – in defensive applications should be included in our study.

The lineages of many “formal exercises”, the forms or kata, can be traced back from Japan, to Okinawa, to China. The oldest versions of these forms from China were often viewed as too “wavy” or full of “flowery” extraneous motions. When analyzed from the standpoint of Qi, however, these older forms make it clear that energy was intended to be included in the oral tradition of how to apply the knowledge. This oral tradition of energy manipulation is clearly missing in most of Okinawan and Japanese karate systems.

This is no different from the overall study of kata bunkai. Many systems of Japanese karate, primarily all derived from Shotokan, simply never had the full knowledge even of common percussive techniques. The early Okinawan masters who taught karate in Japan simply excluded that information. Many Japanese karate-ka may deny that their kata contain joint locks, kyusho strikes or throwing techniques, yet when shown, most start to wake up to a larger, more full and richer system of karate. Those who only ever study a Japanese system of karate, and never train with instructors who have gone back up to the source in Okinawa and thus learned this more complete knowledge of kata bunkai, will probably go to their grave ignorant of what might have been.

By extension of this principle, those Japanese or Okinawan masters who never embrace the study of Qi, will likewise always be missing some of

what they could be including to make their art more complete, more powerful, and more satisfying.

Qi and the Chinese Systems

Many modern practitioners of Qigong, true masters, are able to demonstrate Qi phenomena that defy any explanation by modern science. This includes medical and healing abilities, the ability to alter their brainwaves, and the ability to use qi in seemingly impossible ways in martial applications. This includes the ability to knock down opponents without touching. Once such master is Paul Dong. Another American is Richard Mooney.

All I can say to skeptical fellow karate-ka, is, yes, be skeptical and also open minded. Go see the Qi masters for yourself. Experience these things for

first hand. No amount of me telling you will convince you. It certainly didn't convince me. Once I experienced Qi phenomena, and once I could see it, I was no longer skeptical. This is the path I recommend you try.

So, Does Qi Exist? Science and the Subtle Energies

Whether from the world of Japanese and Okinawan karate, or from modern biology and medicine, the argument against Qi pretty much goes like this: “Qi doesn't exist because qi doesn't exist”.

Not exactly a strong endorsement of the scientific process.

When real scientists have examined Qi/Ki, some really interesting things have been discovered. Meridians have been measured using low dose radioactive tracers. When injected into humans at the traditional acupoints located on the meridians, they move along the meridians in the traditionally assigned direction of qi flow, at a rate about 10

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times faster than they diffuse randomly through tissues when injected at points that are not on the meridians.

Additionally, these radioactive tracers have been measured moving along the meridians and crossing through blood vessels, yet aren't carried away by the flow of the blood, and in some cases even moved against the flow of blood.

A German scientist, Reinholt Voll, did early research on acupuncture points and meridians, and found that measurements of the body's electrical resistance dropped significantly at acupoints compared to other places on the body. He even developed a system of diagnostics using alterations in normal electrical resistance at acupoints, which he successfully mapped to specific portions of individual internal organs.

Human energy fields, described in systems of Asian spirituality, especially those from India, as the Auric Field, have been photographed using a technique known as Kirlian photography. While modern, Western biomedicine has been quick to denounce Kirlian photographs, they have yet to produce any scientific explanation for the information obtained in such methods.

This is just a miniscule sampling of the known science of subtle energies in the human organism. Entire books have been written on this subject, and I have my own in production at this time. See the bibliography at the end of this paper for a few of them.

Qi/Ki in Japanese & Okinawan Karate

Today

One of the key questions I am hopefully exposing here, is "When and where was this information lost? When exactly did the Okinawan arts specifically drop the study of Qi?" I don't have a satisfactory answer for this question yet.

Clearly, a great deal of information was simply omitted when karate spread from Okinawa to Japan almost 100 years ago. It seems, however, by that time, that at least some versions of Okinawan arts appear to not have included the study Qi. A great deal more information was lost during WWII, when many masters in China,

Okinawa and Japan were killed. This was a huge loss of the oral traditions of training and history. It is even possible that the Okinawan arts never universally had the knowledge of Qi or included it in their systems. While evidence abounds that knowledge and exchange between early Okinawan instructors and Chinese instructors was commonplace, we don't, however, have any full description of the content of that teaching. Just as Okinawan instructors did not share all their knowledge in Japan, it is entirely possible, if not probable, that Chinese instructors did not share all their knowledge with visiting Okinawans. Especially in Okinawa, though also in China and probably elsewhere, martial arts training at times was outlawed, punishable by death. It was very much an underground phenomenon, and nothing was written down for reasons of security. Oral tradition was the only method of teaching. It is the loss of this oral tradition that many of us are attempting to replace.

I welcome email enquiries on this subject of qi/ki in karate. The questions of whether knowledge of qi was ever included in Okinawan karate, and if so, where, when and how it was dropped continues to be a subject of research and interest for me.

Likewise, if you are an instructor actively combining the study of energy/qi with your karate system, I am always happy to compare notes. It is probable we will be able to help each other.

Summary

In conclusion, my take-home-messages to any interested reader, are that:

(1) Yes, Qi/Ki is real. Our bodies operate in part on this subtle energy that we absorb from the background field of the universe. Practice leads to proficiency, and when you sense the Qi, or see the Qi, for yourself, then you will know. It is a bit like those 3D pictures that at first, appear to be simply a mishmash of color blotches with no real meaning. Training your eyes to refocus, however, reveals a whole new, 3-dimensional world. Thus it is with Qi.

(2) Inclusion of the study and development of your own subtle energy system, the Qi/Ki of your body, is and should be a required part of every

martial arts system. It has the side-benefit of making you physically stronger, and healthier in every other way. It opens up a whole new world of possibilities, of how to improve your defense, and make counterattacks more effective, by learning to manipulate the qi of your own body and that of your opponent.

(3) As few Japanese or Okinawan instructors are trained in Qi/Ki, taking up the study of Qigong and/or Tai Chi, is therefore highly recommended for all karate-ka, regardless of your current level of expertise or your rank. All aspects of Karate study and training will improve by studying and including Qi in your regimen. If you do, somehow, manage to find an instructor of Japanese/Okinawan karate who also knows Qigong, well, good for you! You will now have someone who knows your language, and will be able to “translate”, and assist you on your path.

If any of this information proves useful to you, it will have served its purpose.

Do Good, Avoid Evil
Arlan Cage

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